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YOUR OPINIONS | Letters

Higher education's needs are being addressed

Hammond
Now that the Legislature has completed its fiscal session, legislators are to be congratulated for the excellent job they did for higher education.

Teachers and university faculty throughout the state will receive much-deserved raises; and millions of dollars were dedicated to critical building maintenance and construction projects.

During the 1980s, when the state's economy was hit hard by the collapse of the oil and gas industry, state officials' efforts were aimed at just trying to keep higher education afloat. Little money was available to construct new classroom or laboratory buildings or even to properly maintain the buildings we already had.

Now that Louisiana's economy has begun to improve, the Legislature has wasted little time in addressing serious problems facing higher education.

We at Southeastern Louisiana University have enjoyed unprecedented growth since the mid-1980s. Yet we have not had a new classroom building constructed on campus since the early 1970s. Thanks to our legislative delegation, that will now change.

In the area of capital outlay, Southeastern will receive planning money for a new classroom and science building, new money to renovate and adapt Westside Elementary School for faculty and classroom use and extra dollars to upgrade Southeastern's computer system.

Not in recent memory have our legislators from the Northshore-Florida Parishes worked so hard together for the good of Southeastern. I know I speak for the entire university community when I thank Gov. Mike Foster, state Sen. John Hainkel and the entire delegation for their dedication to higher education and particularly to "their" university. They have earned a kind word from all of us, for without their combined work, Southeastern's efforts to provide state-of-the-art educational opportunities for all citizens would be impossible. As a delegation and individually, they did an outstanding job.

Sally Clausen
President,
Southeastern Louisiana University

Grief center to open here

New Orleans
The Children's Bureau wishes to thank Eric Martin for bringing basketball star Michael Jordan — literally the giant of celebrities — to our city to participate in the Celebrity Golf Invitational held at the Lakewood Country Club.

Because of my agency's involvement with the survivors of homicide, I was reminded once again of Mr. Jordan's recent tragedy. Mr. Jordan is truly a great role model to other survivors of senseless violence. Recently, we all watched as a giant wept for his slain father.

The violence in our city has made it necessary for us to find ways to handle the aftermath of violence, the trauma experienced by the families after the death of a loved one.

The Children's Bureau is planning to open The Center for Grief, Trauma and Prevention of Violence, and we are eagerly awaiting Mr. Jordan's consent to name it The James Jordan Center for Grief, Trauma and Prevention of Violence as a tribute to his late father.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our heart-



MICHAEL JORDAN
Center will bear father's name

felt gratitude to Eric Martin, who was so sympathetic to our cause and has presented this proposal to Mr. Jordan on our behalf. We would also like to thank the staff of the Lakewood Country Club, particularly the pro shop, for their full cooperation and support.

Leela K. Murthy
Director of Development,
Children's Bureau

Why Foster acted as he did

New Orleans
Poor Mike Foster! Every time he speaks or acts from his heart and/or gut, he gets in trouble — this time by saying he will support his party's nominee for the U.S. Senate whoever he or she may be.

I am sure Gov. Foster was not thinking of the lightly regarded David Duke as a serious candidate, but when asked if that endorsement would include Mr. Duke, Big Mike had no alternative but to answer in the affirmative.

Why? Because Mike Foster is indeed an unusual man and politician. He defied all odds in becoming governor.

First, he switched to the Republican Party not because he needed to be a Republican but because his party had left him as it has so many other conservative Democrats.

Second, Foster's absolute honesty mystifies other politicians and the liberal media. He hits more targets from the hip than you guys do taking dead aim. This has endeared him to an overwhelming majority of the Louisiana electorate.

And third, Foster sees the absolute necessity for this country's federal government to get off the backs of the majority of taxpayers. He sees that the Republican agenda has made tremendous strides toward that goal only to be vetoed time after time.

The Republican candidate for the Senate will certainly support that goal more than his or her Democratic opponent, and that would include Mr. Duke in the unlikely scenario that would make him the Republican nominee.

Bill Horne

Non-neutral about Duke

Metairie
As a citizen of this country and a veteran of World War II, I find it distressing, disappointing and downright disgusting that our governor stated that he would support David Duke.

A large part of my mother's family, including her younger brother, his wife, their children and grandchildren and other relatives, were slaughtered during Hitler's "purification" of Poland of his Jews.

Those responsible for the cruelty, inhumanity and murder of millions of innocent people, including women and children, are David Duke's heroes. Hitler is his idol.

Since our governor says he would support him and in fact has never repudiated him, perhaps he shares Duke's philosophy.

There is no way to be neutral about Duke and his kind. You are either for or against them.

Which is it, governor?
Samuel H. Singer

What value placed on life?

Baton Rouge
Our son was murdered on a street in Jefferson Parish on Sept. 21, 1995.

The detectives handling the case did an excellent job and were very helpful and supportive. The guilty person was caught very quickly, and we were kept informed of everything that was going on.

The person who stabbed my son signed a confession, but the Jefferson Parish district attorney's office strongly encouraged us to offer a plea bargain to this person. The attorney handling the case promised me this person would serve at least seven years of a 15-year sentence.

Although I did not think this was a harsh enough punishment for murder, we were grief-stricken and not very knowledgeable about the courts. We were told there was a strong chance the guilty party would get off since the two witnesses who were with my son feared for their lives and would not testify. It would have been the defendant's word only in court, since my son was no longer here to defend himself.

We agreed to this plea bargain strictly on the advice of the Jefferson Parish DA's office. I asked only to be notified when the sentencing took place so I could at least see the person who took my son's life at 26 years of age.

I was notified one hour before the sentencing took place; it is impossible to get from Baton Rouge to Jefferson Parish and into court in one hour. I was also told by a private attorney that under the law, this confessed murderer will be eligible for parole in five years (Sept. 16, 2000).

When I asked the Jefferson Parish attorney handling the case about this, he said he was not sure about it but he would check into it. I find it very hard to believe that a prosecuting attorney did not know the laws covering parole eligibility.

Every day, I read about crimes being committed by people who have already been convicted, have served a reduced sentence and have been released from prison. What kind of message are the courts sending people when they know they can take a life and be out to murder again in four or five years?

The person who took my son's life will be eligible for parole when he is just about as old as my son was when his life was taken. It seems the punishment for stealing is worse than for taking a person's life.

I will always regret not permitting a jury of 12 mothers and fathers to decide this person's fate instead of two lawyers.

Dale and Sue Adams

Citizens win over business

St. Bernard
On June 25, the Community Development staff in St. Bernard recommended and the Planning Commission voted to deny a zoning change from R-2 to C-1 in the Old Arabi area that would have allowed Wirt Dixie to build a Marketplace there.

I commend the staff and commissioners for listening to and showing consideration for the residents in the Old Arabi area. I am sure they were under great pressure to allow this business

venture to take precedence over the people of the neighborhood, but they chose to listen to their fellow citizens who would be most affected by this change.

Thank you from me and from the more than 400 people who wanted their neighborhood to remain as is. I sincerely hope that our Parish Council follows their lead and accepts their recommendation.

Faith Moran

OUR OPINIONS | Editorials

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The G-7 Fights Terrorism.



'Anti-patronage' fiasco

The fiasco wrought by an ineffective New Orleans City Charter revision and a stiff-necked City Council continues to compound.

The thrust of the revision, approved by voters last fall, was to remove blatant political patronage from the process of selecting professional services consultants by requiring the council to put such jobs up for bidding and objective evaluation. That, at any rate, was how it was sold to the voters. What it did, however, was let the council do virtually anything it wants, and it swiftly did. Now the state Supreme Court says they can do just that.

The charter revision required that contracts for professional services — architects, engineers, accountants, lawyers and consultants — be selected by a bidding process. But it let the council — and the mayor, too, but that is another subject — devise the mechanics for doing so.

So the council decided that bids will be evaluated but not ranked by the council's own top staff members. The council then awards the job, but it is not required to follow the staff recommendations. Further, the council exempted from the bidding process extensions of contracts signed before Jan. 1, the effective date of the charter revision, and future exemptions of any contracts when the council decides "continuity of service is essential."

It found that to be the case with its major current contract with the lawyers and consultants who advise it on regulating utilities, and extended the contract.

The whole procedure was criticized by the very good-government group, the Bureau of

Governmental Research, that had spearheaded the drive to revise the charter to sidetrack patronage. The extensions of utility consultant contracts — worth a total of \$3.8 million a year — were also challenged in court by the Alliance for Affordable Energy, a utility watchdog group.

District Judge Richard Ganuchau ruled against the alliance, and it appealed to the Supreme Court, which put a freeze on the renewal until it could hear the matter. The Supreme Court has now agreed with Judge Ganuchau.

The charter does not prohibit the council from creating exemptions to the bidding process, it ruled 4-3, as long as the action is "not unduly at variance with the purpose of the charter revision, which was to minimize or restrict political patronage in the awarding of consultant contracts." Since the council's exemptions grandfather in virtually all existing contracts, it is hard to see how this is not at variance with the purpose of the charter revision.

The alliance plans to ask the high court to rehear the case. If it does not do so, or does and affirms this ruling, the legal search for remedy seems ended.

That puts the case back into the hands of the voters, who have been cruelly and cynically deceived. Let the council members who put this mess together — only Peggy Wilson opposed it — explain themselves to the constituency that voted for the charter revision to prevent just this kind of political slipperiness.

Theft takes its toll

It could be viewed as petty theft: A handful of toll collectors on the Crescent City Connection pocket a few dollars by scribbling down false or illegible names to make it seem as though a police, fire or other emergency vehicle has crossed the bridge instead of a toll-paying customer.

That's certainly what bridge officials expected when the state legislative auditor launched an investigation into bridge tolls a year ago. At that time, bridge management said toll takers nabbed "the equivalent of a six-pack a day." Instead, investigators found evidence that as much as \$200,000 might have been stolen through this scheme — hardly small change.

Despite this disturbing report, bridge officials are still downplaying the problem. Toll collectors told investigators that the practice is widespread, but Alan LeVasseur, executive director of the Crescent City Connection, says the evidence doesn't support that because revenue collections themselves have not changed much since the audit began.

"What the auditor is talking about is pure speculation," Mr. LeVasseur said.

But the \$200,000 in stolen tolls goes beyond speculation. When the investigation began in July 1995, the number of free passages logged dropped by \$103,375 for the second half of the year. In a full year, that means faked free ride could well have amounted to more than \$200,000 in public money that lined the pockets of toll takers.

That is an outrage to everyone who uses public roads and pays tolls, and regardless of

the scope of the problem, it must be addressed immediately.

The legislative auditor has suggested a number of remedies, some that appear to have merit and others that are, perhaps, less helpful. In the second category we put the suggestion that toll takers not be allowed to have pockets in their uniforms.

But the auditor also suggests surveillance cameras in toll booths and requiring law enforcement officers to give their badge numbers when they sign to cross the bridge at no charge.

The response of bridge management to this report has been defensive and disappointing. In a written response, bridge management said no deficiencies or inadequate controls were noted in seven previous years of audits conducted by independent CPA firms. The recommendations of the auditor have been considered in the past, officials said, and dismissed as either logistically or fiscally unfeasible, although they did go so far as to say they will consider them again.

But whether the problem of theft is in fact a long-standing ill or a recent development is unimportant; the top priority of bridge management should be to eradicate it. The investigation and potential criminal prosecution may serve as something of a deterrent, but the possibility that theft is widespread should not be discounted. Aggressive means should be taken to see that we are not taken by the toll-takers again.